

Community management in Malawi: part of the sustainability problem, not the solution

Type: Short Paper

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Abstract/Summary

This paper reports on a large-scale study of sustainability of rural and small town water supplies, covering 338 water points in four districts of Malawi, conducted in 2011-2012. The study tested ten determinants of sustainability, and critically examined the way that community management works in practice. Results show that technical factors such as installation quality are critically important for sustainability, while community management has only limited positive impact on functionality, and damaging side-effects. The findings seriously challenge the assumptions of efficiency and empowerment that underpin the community management model. The paper argues that true sustainability requires greater professionalisation of water point installation and management, and ongoing public investment in recurrent costs.

Introduction

Received wisdom suggests that community management is an important component of sustainable water supply in rural areas and small towns. Despite the growing shift in emphasis “from system to service” (Schouten and Moriarty 2003, Lockwood and Smits 2011) and on “community management plus”, in reality the basic community management model remains standard practice in Malawi, as in many other low-income countries: agencies install a water point, then hand over full responsibility to a committee of users. District Water Offices are supposed to provide post-construction support, but have limited capacity and receive very little funding (Lockwood and Kang 2012).

The arguments for community management derive from the broader literature on participation, and centre on two claims (Nelson and Wright 1995; Mohan and Stokke 2000). First, that it is efficient: users know immediately when a breakdown has occurred, have a clear interest in fixing it, and (thanks to initial training and regular savings) have both the necessary skills and the money readily available. Second, that it is empowering: users gain new skills and capacities for collective action via the introduced institution of the democratically-elected, gender-balanced, locally-accountable water point committee.

If community management indeed works, it should work well in Malawi, which enjoys various advantages: standardisation on the Afridev pump type; relatively high population density; good roads; accessible water table; absence of armed conflict. Access to safe water in Malawi has increased from 43% in 1990 to 90% in 2015 (WHO/JMP 2016), so it appears that the country is a success story. However, this paper suggests that fundamental problems with community management call into question the sustainability of these recent achievements.

Context, aims and activities undertaken

This mixed methods study was conducted in four districts in Malawi in 2011-2012. Ninety-six water points in 24 VDCs (Village Development Committees, i.e. group villages) were randomly sampled for in-

depth structured surveys, normally three per site: two with users and one with a ‘manager’, i.e. a member of the water point committee. A further 242 water points were surveyed in person, and basic data was collected from VDC members on the remaining 341 water points in the sampled VDCs, so the study covered 679 water points in total. Statistical testing was conducted on a nationwide database of 50,000 water points, as well as on the primary data, and quantitative and qualitative findings were triangulated. Further details on research design and methods are given in Chowns (2014, 2015).

The study addressed two key questions: 1) What are the key determinants of water point sustainability?; and 2) Does community management work? Part One of the study tested the influence of ten proximate determinants of sustainability, as outlined in Table 1. Part Two questioned the ‘efficiency’ and ‘empowerment’ assumptions implicit in the underlying community management model.

Table 1. Determinants of water point sustainability: variables tested

Design and installation variables	Post-construction variables
WPTYPE – Type of technology	MAINTFREQ – Frequency of maintenance
INSTQUAL – Quality of installation	SPARES – Accessibility of spare parts
USERS – User numbers	SKILLS – Availability of maintenance and repair skills
AGE – System age	FUNDS – Availability of funds for maintenance and repair
	SUPPORT – Availability of external support
	THEFT – Incidence of theft

Main results and lessons learnt

Findings regarding the determinants of sustainability are summarised briefly in Table 2; for more details see Chowns (2014). Two clear results emerge. First, technical factors (water point type and installation quality) are highly significant. In one sense, this is obvious: if an installation is poor quality in the first place, then no matter how good the committee, they will struggle to keep the water point working. Observations, surveys and interviews suggested that there is currently wide variation in installation quality, due to factors such as lack of technical skills, allocation of contracts on non-merit basis, and lack of supervision, inspection, or penalties for poor quality work. It is clear that paying more attention to technical quality of hardware would have a significant impact on sustainability.

Second, community management does not work nearly as well as it is supposed to. The core assumptions of the model are seriously called into question by the findings: preventive maintenance is almost never done; repairs are often slow and sub-standard; and committees are unable to collect and save funds. Committees are generally dormant or defunct, and often have to be reconstituted (amid conflict over finance) when a breakdown occurs. Users struggle to hold committees to account, since frequently, as one explained, “the committee is higher than the community”.

Table 2: Determinants of water point sustainability: summary of findings

Variable	Influence	Key findings
WPTYPE	Very high	Boreholes have significantly higher functionality than piped systems (74% vs 27%). There is a very strong statistical association between water point type and functionality, driven mainly by the poor performance of taps. For boreholes, Afridev pumps are much better than solar pumps or Playpumps.
FUNDS	Very high	On average, actual savings are only 2% of expected savings. Median savings = MWK 1150, about \$4 at the time. There are frequent reports of poor financial management, and of community conflict over finance.
SKILLS	High	Most committees are non-functional. Few members are capable of repairing a water point: as one Chair said, “we don't maintain it because we don't know how the borehole works”. There are not enough Area Mechanics. Committees often wait for outsiders (MPs, NGOs) to fix their water points.
THEFT	High	Theft of parts is relatively common, and frequent in certain locations: reported at 15% of all WPs surveyed, with incidence exceeding 50% in 3 of the 24 VDCs. Water points that have experienced theft are more than

		2.5 times more likely to be non-functional than the rest.
INSTQUAL	High	Government water points have much lower functionality (54%) than NGO water points (up to 97%). Respondents’ comments included: “there is high functionality in Mangochi East because the technical part is just very good, the contractor is very good”; “the private sector has no quality control”; “most of these contractors are indeed crooked”.
MAINTFREQ	Medium	Preventative maintenance is almost never done. This is both a cause and a consequence of low skills. For high-quality water points, maintenance is rarely required.
SUPPORT	Medium	Little external support, follow up or monitoring is provided. When provided, it is associated with a small and statistically insignificant increase in functionality.
SPARES	Low	Few spares are held in stock by committees. But physical barriers to access are not very significant; questions of finance are more important. There is no statistical relationship between access to spares and functionality.
USERS	Low	Queuing time is a significant influence on whether people use safe water points; but there is no statistical relationship between user numbers and functionality.
AGE	Low	Age explains less than 1% of the variation in functionality.

These findings clearly call into question both the ‘efficiency’ and ‘empowerment’ claims for community management.

First, they show that community management is inefficient; its assumptions regarding maintenance, repairs, and savings are simply not borne out in practice. The ‘just in case’ financial management model based on regular advance payments into a collective fund is clearly unworkable; cash-strapped poor rural households are naturally unwilling to put money aside into such a fund when there are other more immediate calls on their purses, especially if they do not trust that the money will be safeguarded. Instead, when breakdowns occur, communities struggle to scrape together the funds required – a process that may take some time and cause some friction, but is clearly more financially rational for households.

Community management is also inefficient in another sense, since it requires the active involvement of many more people than necessary. In a VDC with, say, ten water points, it is superfluous and expensive to train ten committees of 10-12 people each, when all that is really needed may be one skilled Area Mechanic with a bike, a phone, and (crucially) an effective means of financing his or her work.

Secondly, and perhaps even more worryingly, community management is disempowering. Users feel disempowered by their inability to hold the committee to account, while committee members feel disempowered by the difficulties they experience in fulfilling their functions. Committees, far from being new arenas in which ‘lowers’ can challenge ‘uppers’ (Chambers 1994), are adapted through a process of ‘institutional bricolage’ (Cleaver 2012) and instead tend to reproduce existing social inequalities. Conflicts over funds tend to undermine trust and erode social capital. Reliance on agencies and local ‘big men’ to fix problems (rather than calling on state support in the form of the District Water Office) tends to reinforce clientelism and erode the social contract.

Community management was originally conceived as a ‘software’ solution to a ‘hardware’ problem – a means to ensure that technical breakdowns were quickly fixed. But the findings of this study show that in many cases the software of the management model is less sustainable than the hardware of the water point itself.

Conclusions and Recommendations

These problems of community management are not a case of ‘civil society failure’ (Mansuri and Rao 2013), but rather of donor failure and state failure. Community management remains the dominant

model because it works better for agencies and governments than for communities themselves. It enables those with resources – donors and the state – to abdicate responsibility for long-term sustainability of water services, placing this burden instead on unpaid and unsupported users. This strategy is short-sighted, because it jeopardises the long-term sustainability of the capital investments made, and also simply unfair.

This paper therefore makes two key recommendations to agencies and governments involved in rural and small town water supplies:

- 1) First, do more to ensure high-quality installation in the first place. This could include improved inspection or auditing of installations, performance-linked installation contracts, and training of specialised personnel.
- 2) Second, and even more importantly, professionalise management, and fund recurrent costs directly – at least in the short to medium term. In practice, this means moving away from the committee model, and instead investing in training a smaller number of Area Mechanics and financing their work directly, via contracts with District Water Offices. This may even be cost-neutral, since there will be significant savings on water point committee training.

Of course, there is still an important role for community participation in water governance, including in decision-making about supply options, and in monitoring water point performance. But this should be emergent, not induced; and should be separated from ‘financial participation’. Communities are not required to bear the recurrent costs of other public services such as education or health, so why should they have to do so for water? We know that the public health benefits of safe water exceed household willingness-to-pay (Null et al 2012), and so user financing will be insufficient.

The challenge of sustainability is twofold: technical and financial. Currently, the community management financial model undermines technical sustainability, and thus is part of the problem, not the solution. The collective action on which it rests has high costs – in terms of money, time, co-ordination, and conflict – which fall unfairly on those with least resources. If we want to ensure ‘Water for Everyone’ we must admit the limitations of this model, and acknowledge that true sustainability requires ongoing public investment in recurrent costs.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Yanjanani Chimpokosera for her fantastic research assistance; to all the research respondents in Malawi for their time and patience; and to the ESRC and IDD Birmingham for financial support.

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